

Historicising Race, Nation and Class: *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) as a Critique of Political Economy

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Boots Riley's 2018 comedy film *Sorry to Bother You* has been hailed by many commentators as a film exploring neoliberal America's honest encounter with the labour question.¹ In this essay, we attempt at a historicist reading of the film using available historical literature, cultural writings and theoretical writings. While it is easy to note the readily associable themes of exclusion, pauperism and racism abundant on the American scene, it is seldom analysed through the unitary perspective of the development of American capitalism and the racial question inherent to it. Let us examine these broader questions while discussing the film.

Sorry to Bother You begins with an Afro-American youth named Cassius 'Cash' Green's (played by LaKeith Stanfield) rather self-humiliating and self-defeating attempt at finding a job. The naming is significant here: cash is (usually) green but Green has no cash. He eventually ends up becoming a telemarketer and remains dissatisfied with uncertain and commission-based income. He lives with his artistic partner Detroit (played by the celebrity actor Tessa Thompson) in a car garage with little to no privacy. His 'landlord' cousin is himself in debt and looks forward to Cash's accumulated rent to pay off his bills. While working at the telemarketing company, Cash discovers one day his 'white voice': the mesmerizing voice of a rich and happy white man who seduces customers into investing in whatever he signs them up for. His manager and company owners are elated and they elevate him into a top worker. Meanwhile, other coworkers at the telemarketing company are angry at not being paid for months and they start a movement to help their cause. Since Cash is now a top worker, he pays little to no heed to his former colleague's issues and keeps working from his new office, eventually alienating his partner Detroit from himself. One day, he is asked to meet his company's (WorryFree) CEO Steve Life, who tells Cash that his huge success so far is but a trailer to his potential as his voice could help the company expand in new ventures, like the conversion of human labourers into horse-like labourers using a latest technological advance. All that Cash has to do is to help the company manage this labour force for next few years. However, Cash refuses to abide by this horrible prospect and he exposes the whole game thanks to his partner and friends, eventually seeing the point of their struggle and becoming a part of it like any ordinary worker.

There are several themes in the film which can be related to the socio-economic and even radical critique of capitalism. Firstly, the theme of not only proletarianization but that of pauperization. It is a feature of neoliberal capitalism that the earlier historical trend of turning vast reserves of labour into proletarian labour is nowhere near its historical levels, meaning that those at the lowest end of this growth story are not absorbed into the 'system' a slow-paid wage labourers but simply outcasts who have no meaningful inclusion within it. Thus, it is readily observable that while in Charlie Chaplin's films the figure of the tramp encounters unemployment seldom, the hero of *Sorry to Bother You* is struggling to ensure even a minimal level of standard of living. With Charlie Chaplin it was still possible to think of unlikely sources of help, like the rich drunkard bourgeois who kept on helping the tramp in *City Lights*.ⁱⁱ However, in our times, such a scenario is near absent, hence the need for a fiction-like imagination of acquiring a top job overnight, much like how Cash becomes a top worker using his so-called 'white voice'. In the filmic context, it implies that Cash's struggles to overcome his poverty do not translate into a 'proper' job, thereby rendering comic his tragic situation.

Second, this figure of the new forms of exclusion is racialized, evident by the very term 'white voice'. The history of slavery and racism in USA is too well-known to be recounted here, the key problematic is that despite US capitalism being the core of global capitalism, the racial question has refused to subside there despite the Civil Rights Movement and voting to office of someone like Barack Obama. The magical 'white voice', after the acquisition of which Cash becomes a corporate hero overnight is much like the external thing ('whistle') that Charlie Chaplin ends up swallowing in *City Lights*. While Chaplin hilariously could not control his hiccups sounding the whistle comically every time he tried hard at remaining silent, in *Sorry to Bother You* the hero can control this external voice, which despite being foreign to him is also a unique feature of his success. It would appear that much like the racial division around him, the "white voice" is a symbol of social and economic success and is largely elusive for the Blacks and non-whites at large.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, the film under discussion documents a new historical phase in the racialised economic-ideological context.

Third, the question of control of labour. It is a supreme irony that in an age which is celebrated as having transcended the labour question through the development of technology has to rely back again on ruthless exploitation of labour. Could it be that the film hark back to the good old times when labour still reigned supreme and technology had a little say? This reading can surface in the context of WorryFree's CEO's insistence upon raising a new breed of working men to ensure the job being done in a much more efficient manner. There are shades of Taylorism here too: turning working *men* into tools of labour without having a mind of their so that they focus solely upon the work to be done instead of putting their thinking into it. Thus, Harry Braverman's diagnosis of mid-twentieth century American capitalism stands true even today, with slight modifications.^{iv}

Fourth, the corporate culture of work at RegalView, his first office for the telemarketing company, is instructive in many ways. The corporate culture demands the worker to work for not salary but commissions, which becomes one of their important demands. The figure of Debauchery, aptly named for the white woman manager who does nothing but give 'inspirational' speeches: she qualifies to be a top contender for what David Graeber calls as a "bullshit job": "a bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case."^v She stands for the dialectical counterpart for mass unemployment: her job is to serve as the face of doing something in the guise of doing nothing. In other words, it is a non-act in the Žižekian sense of the term, Žižek defines the act as "a radical gesture that disrupts the existing symbolic order"^{vi}. In other words, what the office space symbolizes is the "inefficiency" at the core of the apparently "efficient" capitalist enterprise, which is also manifest in the kind of "unproductive" work that is done via telemarketing.^{vii}

Fifth, the question of strike is important. *Sorry to Bother You* allows us to envisage a collective resistance against capital's sway over work lives, what Søren Mau has elaborated, following Marx, as "mute compulsion". Marx defines mute compulsion as the third way in which capital dictates labour, apart from consent and coercion: mute compulsion is capital's hegemony over work process which forbids alternative forms of work among workers. Mau adds that "Capital's mute compulsion is the result of their mutual mediation of each other: proletarians are subjected to capitalists by means of a set of mechanisms which simultaneously subjects everyone to the logic of valorisation, and vice versa".^{viii} *Sorry to Bother You* asks its actors to cast off this compulsion to work and organize themselves in strikes. There is also a kind of communist figure who professionally organises workers into striking: Squeeze (played by Steven Yeun) is the wandering figure who gets involved with Green's girlfriend when she feels that Green has betrayed his principles and compromised too much for the sake of money.

Sixth, the film portrays the base and superstructure model. While a large sum of money is being made at the telemarketing company, the CEO informs Green that that is not where the actual profit is: superprofits are being made in the secret establishment where "real" work is done by workers who are to be transformed into horse like workers. While it is tempting to see this as a simple base/superstructure binary, Marx's own writings make it clear that the production process under capitalism becomes progressively opaque and beyond the control of workers. As he writes: "Accompanied by Mr. Moneybags [the capitalist] and by the possessor of labour-power [the worker], we therefore take leave for a time of this noisy sphere [of circulation or buying and selling], where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all people, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face "No admittance except on business." Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making."^{ix} This means that the production process gradually passes over from being molecular to becoming more and more integrated into the larger global capitalist system, out of which there is little scope.

Seven, there is a nice little irony in the transformation of workers into horse-like super strong workers. The film alludes to both the Marxist theory of alienation as well as Nietzschean notion of superman. While Nietzsche imagined superman as transcending modernity through his self-mastery, creativity in the face of adversity, the Marxist lesson is that even this attempt at individual self-liberation is a capitalist utopia at its best. *Sorry to Bother You* re-imagines the Nietzschean version of superman into the capitalist version of it in which the very attempt at self-improvement and resistance ends up supporting the mode of production in question.^x

Eight, the film picks up the question of art. Green's girlfriend Detroit, symbolically named after the city which is itself a symbol of capitalist crisis, is an accomplished artist who not only creates physical artworks but also does performance. One of her performances in the film, in which she asks the audience to throw balloons filled with blood and other unsavoury items, stands out as a unique way of representing the violence inherent within the system. Her performance, for its very shocking nature, is a welcome re-staging of modernist artwork, however, it is, for historical reasons, encapsulated in a different historical time which is often called as "postmodern". Detroit's performance is a reminder of the modern within the postmodern.

Nine, the question of race within the film is a refreshing redressal of the subject in a Hollywood film without succumbing to the multiculturalist, representist temptation. Mass poverty in the USA and elsewhere is most severe upon

social minorities and excluded though it is by no means confined to them. There are white workers who form the core of the protest movement, and there are people of other ethnicities as well. What comes around is a universal solidarity against exploitation which is very much a progressive imagination.

Ten, the question of ethics. The film discusses this question towards the very end when Green is able to denounce an offer which would have turned him into a billionaire albeit at the cost of renouncing his humanness. That he is able to resist this temptation and join back his friends in the protest movement and expose the whole business is due to his ethical circumstances which do not manifest themselves in a previous scene from the film when he picks up a comically marked verbal duel with his cousin who also works at the same telemarketing company's office.

To conclude, *Sorry to Bother You* therefore addresses pertinent questions of our times and shows a way forward in a magnificently artistic framework. It shows how genuine art need not shy away from addressing questions of daily life and suffering while at the same time demanding a proper art form in which this redressal can take place.

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